

THE TACUGAMA CHIMPANZEE SANCTUARY AND LAND MINISTER'S CORRUPTION NETWORK



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On February 3, 2025, the Sierra Leone Monitor reported warning of vexing remarks directed to ministries of government against illegal encroachment on the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary. That warning signaled the gross disregard for environmental protection and preservation of the country's endowed biodiversity enrichment. Despite several warnings issued in the past, this inimical activity seems unrelenting. Recent reports also show increased alarms being raised by conservation groups and local communities about biodiversity loss especially in the western area of Sierra Leone.

In the present clamour for settlement creation and other human activities, the few remaining protected ecosystems have become direct target by land grabbers and illegal land deals. Law makers of the Sierra Leone Parliament have produced and refined progressive laws that guarantee the protection of the forest reserves and entire biodiversity. Unfortunately, most of the laws are preserved in shelves while illegal land seekers destroy the forest reserves. Consequently, the western area forest reserve, once a thriving ecosystem, is now a victim of relentless deforestation fueled by animal poaching and illegal land sale. The wealth generated from clandestine land sales, involving the land minister through existing corruption network, does not trickle down for the general good. The failure of the government to regulate land sales and the infiltration of individuals into the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, are resulting in environmental degradation and the impoverishment of the local communities.

A Grand Conspiracy

Investigations into the archives of key ministries and agencies linked to environmental damage, such as the Ministry of Lands, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, and the Environment Protection Agency, among others, signal gross corruption network by mafias working in those institutions. This network has evolved over time and implanted its foothold with formidable grip. The most unfortunate practice is that perpetrators infiltrate protected areas without hesitation on pretext that they are covered by heads of the ministries and agencies involved. The Minister of Lands for instance, Dr. Turad Senesie, has been implicated in illegal land issues in the western area.

In February 7, 2025 Minister Turad Senesie was found guilty in a case of Pratt v Senesie. The Judge's ruling stated that individuals should not forcefully remove private property without due process of the law. On passing the verdict against the sitting Minister of Lands, many citizens expressed satisfaction on grounds that the Judge did not favour the Minister. Outside of the court room, I bumped into Madam Juliet who was in the court on different matter. She expressed appreciation for the outcome of the ruling. "Cases involving government officials of high standing are always biased in favour of them", she lamented. "But things are changing". The Judge seems to understand the complexity of the corruption network entrenched in government offices. And the verdict against the sitting Minister shows

that business is taking different turn.

Further investigation proves that the Minister is notoriously trapped in land issues, and secretly signs land documents without consideration for proper planning system and destruction of the protected regions of the western area. In some cases, as reported by the "The Times SL" newspaper in April 2024, Dr. Turad Senesie seized lands under the pretext of state-owned properties and later sold them to private individuals. He has also been implicated in other sacred land issues.

Amidst these troubling accusations is the thriving corruption network linked to the Minister. It involves series of operations that are complicated and invisible to outsiders. Illegal land sales and grabbing especially in the Tacugama Sanctuary through the network is harder to detect. This invincibility of crime in such national protected area represents recent betrayals perpetuated by top-ranking officials. For a Minister of such powerful line ministry, illegal activities involving the environment should not be considered lightly.

The Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary

The Tacugama Sanctuary lays along the parchment of the western area rural district, immediately after Gloucester Village. Its existence dates to 1995 when Bala Amarasekaran and his wife, Sharmila began rescuing and rehabilitating the western Chimpanzees. The rescue effort actually began in 1988 when they first saved Bruno, a baby Chimpanzee in a village forest tied to a tree. The Sanctuary is one of the few innovations in the 2020s with a mission to rescue and energise, and to cure and maintain orphaned Chimpanzees from any part of the country. Over the years, the Sanctuary has become an attractive tourist attraction point with hundreds of visitors streaming into the location to enjoy guided tours and view the western Chimpanzees, birds, and other mammalian species.

This transformative capacity owes to the Sanctuary's diversification effort, operating as a mixed baggage of organisations. They incorporated activities such as community outreach programs, environmental sustainability and wildlife research. Subsequently, the Sanctuary was rebranded into an eco-tourism hub for Freetown following the establishment of eco-lodges and series of related activities for human entertainment.

This evolving Sanctuary has faced serious threat of extinction in the face of the thriving corruption network from the Ministry of Lands. Episodic activities linked to the Ministry under the tutelage of the Minister are the most recent threats. Judging from the existing threat level, it is likely that the Sanctuary may be forced to fold up in coming months or years if proactive actions are not taken by the government and other stakeholders.

What Next?

Much of the evidences point to the grand betrayal of a sitting Minister of the national course – to serve the citizenry through effective service delivery. The Minister of Lands is part of those whose moments in governance represent complete disservice to the state and people. Attempts to destroy the national protected area where the western Chimpanzees reside are dangerous. The corruption network in the ministry must be dismantled and ring leaders apprehended to reintroduce sanity and enhance effective governance. Democratic practice anchored in subtlety only lays the foundation for state plunder, and for individuals' frivolous corrupt practices.

Accountability should be held to the utmost level. Individuals' positions should not shield them from facing the law in the event that they betray the course for which they are recruited. The Minister should be subjected to disciplinary actions in the same way as the messenger when he undermines efforts to restore biodiversity loss.

Swift action should be taken to dismantle the corruption network evident in the Ministry of Lands and other Ministries. Robust investigations must be launched by independent team to understand the complexity of events around the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary. Findings from such investigations must be fully and swiftly addressed to ensure that corrective measures are carried out to restore sanity and enhance the progress of the national protected area.

The Anti Corruption Commission should play a leading role in tracking and dismantling the corruption network evident in the ministry by reviewing systems and processes. They must also impose penalties for negative actions in the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary under the watch and direction of the Minister.